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# While Mind Dances with Heart: Nurturing Design Vocabularies Through Personal and Cultural Identities

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Although there are many ways of approaching design, my aims "in teaching young student designers was to have them understand the importance of finding the balance between the intuitive with the rational." (Mirochnik, 2000: 65) The approach that I take in teaching my beginning landscape design studio is one in which I draw upon my former career as a dancer/choreographer. I have found that within the process of creating and performing dance, the rational and the visceral constantly intersect: choreography and performance are processes in which the mind dances with the heart. I educate my beginning design students to start their first design project with the development of an internal dialogue with their intuitions and personal bodily experiences. Being in contact with their internal dialogues enables them to draw upon their personal and cultural identities to give shape to the forms that they are creating. I challenge my students to make contact with their personal and cultural identities as a way of engaging their heart within the rational design process.

In the past decade, the issue of personal and cultural identity has been a hot topic within contemporary intellectual discourse in the fields of cultural study, anthropology, human geography, and sociology. Environmental designers, impacted by these fields, have responded to the issue of personal and cultural difference by creating design vocabularies that are sensitive to users' identities. In my paper I will describe how I engaged my beginning landscape design studio students in a process that challenged them to reflect on their personal and cultural identities, and how this processes of acknowledging and celebrating identity helped them develop their individual design vocabularies.

I will go on to describe the two-stage teaching strategy I used to engage my students hearts. The two-stage process challenged my students to: 1) artistically represent their emotional responses to their favorite place on campus through their choice of a variety of media (i.e. music, dance, photo, poem, sketch), and 2) to create a "metaphorical garden" design, which was not a literal garden per se, but rather was a way of using a landscape vocabulary (composed of trees, typography, water, etc.) to further explore their felt responses to their favorite places. Then, I will explain how the two-stage journey enabled my students to express and transform their personal and cultural identities of a place through artistic conceptualization. At the same time, they analyzed their bodily experiences and created personal design vocabularies in which new forms emerged from their rational as well as emotional ways of knowing.

## A Two-stage Teaching Strategy: The Landscape of My Heart

Designers trained within the rational design paradigm tend to become professionals who believe that they must detach their identities and emotions from the process of creating places for their users and clients. Based on this rational paradigm, teaching beginning students how to approach the design of a specific site has traditionally employed the following steps: the invention of design concepts, the analysis of physical and ecological forms, and the response to users' behavior patterns and needs. A typical strategy that students are taught within the traditional paradigm of rationality, is one in which they search the library for books or journals that reveal how the master designers of the past would have solved the programmatic and typological problems that the site presents. In other words, students have traditionally been taught to use someone else's vocabulary, rather than inventing their own, as a way of developing the design of a landscape.

However, the other way to approach design is based on our own bodily experiences of places and everyday knowledge (Claridge, 1979). Each of us has our own ways of exploring landscapes. We have our particular ways to tell the stories of the landscapes that we have experienced. Our senses and emotions, as well as our mental capacities, all come into play whenever we experience a particular landscape; when we stroll through a garden or jog along a park path, or picnic at the seashore, or even when we drive on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. In all these cases we constantly have feelings and thoughts about the environment that we are immersed within. I intentionally seek ways of engaging my students in the use of their own experience and memories as starting points for their first design explorations. My student's first assignment in their beginning design studio is to create a bridge that connects the ordinary language that they already have with the design language that professionals use to talk about, plan, and manipulate the landscape.

My students depart on their design journey from the assignment, "Landscape of My Heart". First, they have to go to their favorite place on campus. I ask them to pay attention to how they are experiencing this favorite place: observe, contemplate and feel the heart beat of the place. Then, they sketch and document the things that they are interested in. Perhaps what captures their attention is the nearby traffic, the sunlight washing the landscape, or the wind dancing with the nearby trees, or the people or the buildings in the area. It could be



the smells, the sounds, or the memories evoked by the landscape.

Then, they choose a piece of art that represents the feeling they have of this place. The form of the art can be any type of art, i.e., music (a rock-n-roll song, classical, whatever), dance, photo, poem, video, collage, etc. They can also create their own sounds or body movements that represents their feeling, if they are not satisfied with any existing art forms. After they pick (or create) a form of art, they have to explain why the form of art as a mode of expressing transformed their feeling of the place into a real material creation. Then, they have to name this transformation and create a three-dimensional graphic scheme that represents the transformation.

Second, after they name this transformation, they enter into the process of "conceptualizing" a design idea. So, the next step, for them, is to use the newly named transformation as the starting point to create what I call, "a new metaphorical garden design." The dimensions of the "metaphorical garden" that they will construct is limited to a dimension of one cubic foot. They can use any type of landscape element in this garden, i.e., plants, topography, water features, etc. Their objective is to design this garden in a way that represents their newly named transformation.

In the process of their design work, their concept of their metaphorical garden will emerge. The concept will become a useful way for them to make design decisions, and to make the bridge between their ordinary way of talking about landscape and the professional language way of talking about the landscape.

### **Listening to the Heartbeats in Students' Landscape Dialogues**

The projects that my students created surprised me. I learned about who they were from the stories of their favorite campus places and the art pieces that they shared with me. The relationships between them (as the beginning design students) and myself (as the instructor) were transformed through a process of mutual engagement. Within the mutual relationship, I was the listener and they were the storytellers. Based on the individual stories, we developed the various design languages that reflected the different personal and cultural identities that were brought by various student members of our studio community. Although the majority of the thirty-three students' favorite places were located within the University of Maryland's public plaza areas, I was surprised and delighted that at the uniqueness of each of their themes or styles. None of them use the same art forms, i.e., the same paintings, poems, dances, or music to represent their artistic transformations. I made it clear to them that there was no standard design principle that everybody had to follow, and that everyone's project was to be evaluated based on their personal styles that spoke for who they were. As a result of my prompting them to think for themselves - and think about the cultural roots and set of experiences that defined their identities - some of them ended up with neat, well defined landscapes that referred to a modern design language, while oth-

ers applied vernacular, or postmodern forms.

### **Case One: Like being wrapped in a warm blanket**

The following cases are the examples that illustrate the process in which my students searched for the design language that reflected their personal path. Tom's favorite place on the University of Maryland campus was a small sitting area, which included a small water fountain, near a large public plaza. He described his overall sensation as being like "having his private room in a very large house." When he set there, he realized:

"This area gave me a very warm and cozy feeling. .... The benches are surrounded by plantings, which gave me the feeling of being wrapped in a warm and colorful blanket - cozy, secure, and warm. Plants with beautiful blue blooms, or shrubs provide a buffer between you and others. The sense of enclosure is very apparent, a small isolated place among the large and spacious plaza - a place for solitude, alone with one's thoughts, a place for quiet rest. You can still feel connected to all the activity going on in the plaza, but this area provides a certain feeling of being alone."

Tom's sensation of the sitting area as being a place that was like his own room lead him to think about one of his favorite Van Gogh paintings called *Room At Arles*, because the painting gave him a similar warm and cozy feeling. Tom was a returning student in his mid forties. His "metaphorical garden" model was constructed with a shining red blanket backdrop, and cut-paste paper artworks made of various vibrant colors, i.e., yellow, green, blue, purple, etc. He posted the Van Gogh poster at the lower left corner of the red blanket. His overall style conveyed a sense of childhood fun and playful energy. It was simple, warm and joyful. However, what touches me the most about Tom's design, was the story he told about the little poster that he inserted in his red blanket. Listen to the story that Tom told; a story that began twenty years earlier:

"In the late 1970's while I was an undergraduate, I bought this poster and kept it on my wall all throughout my college years. A smaller print hangs above my bed today. What is it about this painting that drew me to it some 20 plus years ago and again for this assignment today? As with all Van Gogh, it's the warm and vibrant color. I have always had a sense of affinity to his struggle to teach himself to draw and paint while feeling unhappy and unsure about his artistic ability. In retrospect, he too was trying to find his own, unique contribution to the world."

When Tom revealed his interpretation regarding the struggle that Van Gogh had been through, I felt that Tom was questioning himself: his career change in his mid forties, and his uncertainty of whether he could "find his own, unique contribution to the world." Within the restless struggles along the uncertain path, Tom needed a very simple, warm, and secure spot to rest his heart and his mind. He concluded:

"Among all the thousands of young students, sometimes I need a simple, quiet place to be alone with my thoughts. The sensation of being wrapped in a warm



blanket is such a strong memory for me when I feel the need for comfort and quiet. This same feeling may have been Van Gogh's inspiration to paint his small, simple room, a document of his simple, quiet place to be alone".

In his "metaphorical garden" and the projects Tom created later that semester, he always made use of very simple forms with vibrant colors. I felt that Tom had attempted, and in many ways succeeded, in developing a design vocabulary that reflective of the simple, warm, and secure place that he needed in his own life journey.

### Case Two: Soul searching sight

Julie's favorite spot on campus was, like Tom's, a simple chair adjacent to Hornbake Plaza. However, she had a very different set of responses. The simple chair that she liked to sit on was a memorial chair dedicated to the Maryland students who had lost their lives because of drunk drivers. When Julie presented her project she revealed, with a great deal of emotion, a true story of a tragedy that had touched her life several years ago: her sister and niece were victims who were killed by a drunk driver. Her project enabled her to express how she felt about the loss of her sister and her niece, and her desire to still be connected with them. "Separation and connectedness" highlighted the underlying concept of her project.

The very simple chair memorial that she designed helped her walk through one of the most complicated emotional journeys that she had taken within her otherwise ordinary life; a journey that went from the shock and sadness of the loss of her loved ones, to the acceptance of the tragedy, to the hope of a heavenly connection. To express this journey, the changes of levels from the ground upward toward the sky, and the contrast of dark and light become the vocabularies that she developed in both of her projects. During the first phase of design, in which students were asked to create a representation of their emotional response to their favorite on-campus site, Julie built a full-scale ladder. She inserted drawings and collages in the space between the rungs of the ladder to represent various aspects of her favorite place.

At the bottom of the ladder, in the space between two rungs, she inserted a drawing of a chair memorial that reflected her memories and thoughts about Julie's loved ones. In the next section of the ladder she inserted a drawing depicting the location of the chair. The third insert within the ladder rungs contained her drawing of two symbolic chairs: a white chair against the black backdrop represented her sister and her niece who had passed away. The black chair against the blue sky represented Julie herself, who lived in the real world but has been trapped by the sadness of the tragic loss. The fourth insert, near the top of the ladder, showed hands in search of answer from the heaven. And finally, the insert between the last step and the top of ladder was composed of a yellow ribbon that symbolized the love and memory that forever connected her with her loved ones.

In the second phase of this beginning design studio project (the "metaphorical garden" phase) Julie created a terrace garden that she entitled "Soul Searching Sight". Listen to her

description in which she connects design concepts with personal memory:

"Each level of the garden is made from the shape of a heart. A simple straight forward expression of love. However in a series of swirled terraces, the shape forms a flower from an aerial view. The various levels of the garden fountain represent the levels of recovery after the death of a loved one. The climb to the top is the soul searching path to acceptance. The lower levels show death's burden. The fountain waters war the flood of tears. The center fountain, with its jets of upward streaming water, draws the attention upwards toward heaven. This finalized the concept of separation due to death, but connection through the heavens."

After presenting the Soul Searching Sight, Julie told me that she felt that the process of creating her metaphorical garden was a symbolic healing process for her. She felt that she had experienced an artistic transformation through project that helped her not only develop design vocabularies, but also develop a more positive approach to leading her current life. Even though she had experienced a great loss, Julie felt that she could do something meaningful for her loved ones. For Julie, the design process that she went through enabled her to turn loss into a personal design language.

### Case Three: Potential Energy

Helen was almost twenty years old. She enjoyed observing the many different ways in which people used the University of Maryland's central Mall area, an half-mile long grassy open space located at the heart of campus. Helen liked watching the energy that emerged from the activities that people engaged in within the Mall. She was fascinated by the varieties of energy levels that people exhibited, and how the long ally-like row of trees that along the edge of the Mall's open grassy area screened the peoples energies. During the "representation of an emotional response to a favorite place" phase of the design, Helen made a tape recording of a water drop sound to represent the campus Mall area. She describes the recording:

"Human presence can change a place probably faster than any other element. One person in a crowd acts as the drop of water over a waterfall, minuscule and not willing or capable of deviating. Yet the slow trickle of a stream provides enough interest to inspire thought, without inhibiting the mind's wandering tendencies. In this way, this place provides the potential for both boisterous activity, and passive introspection.... The vegetation in the area, particularly the alley of trees, in conjunction with smaller plantings - has a muting, calming effect over the area.... All activities visible from this place, are viewed through this screen, at least mentally. Times of high activity seem just a little less hectic seen through this screen, and times of isolation seem a little more welcoming with the vegetation surrounding you."

Helen's metaphorical garden design was a waterfall plaza. The main intention of her design was to allow users of the space to be in an area of high activity, while not feeling involved. She transformed the vegetation screen into a water screen. The



water created a "screen" from the activities, while the water itself was part of the activities that occurred at the plaza. In terms of the different levels of activities that created layers of energy levels, her modern-style plaza provided various spaces for public, semi-public and private activities to take place. In her design she gave options to people who were tired of the traffic and crowded main streets, by providing them with welcoming walking areas and corners in which they could stop for a peaceful moment to contemplate and relax. She also provided areas in which children could climb and play in a the rock fountain area.

#### Case Four: Constructed Hidden Garden

Bob liked to get away from the campus crowd, and so his favorite place on the University of Maryland campus was a seldom-used garden in a wooded area close to the university's central Mall. Meandering through Bob's "hidden garden" was a worn brick paths that showed its age. Moss and lichen sprouted from low walls that surrounded the garden. This was one of the places on campus where few travelers passed by, which Bob liked because he could always count on finding refuge in this peaceful place. He felt very comfortable and relaxed whenever he visited his "hidden garden." He escapes from the reality of being one of the campus's thirty thousand students comforted him. However, whenever he reentered reality after his short escapes he recognized:

"All sense of peace and quiet is washed away and I am swept up in this sea of people. The fantasy is gone. My hidden garden was a construct, newer than most of the buildings its trees obstruct. Its simple layout designed as a single stop on the journey across the campus. Its natural seeming curves measured and its columns carefully placed by masons and surveyors. My hidden garden is really a public construct. All is not lost however. I will be able to deceive myself for a while next time."

Bob's "metaphorical garden," that he titled "the Hand Plaza," a design reflected the play between "reality" and the "escape from reality," that defined his experience of the garden. His "Hand Plaza," was a design in which two platforms, each constructed in the shape a hand, formed the topography of the site design. Beneath these hand-form platforms was a Zen garden. Within his design he emphasized that the designers' hands manipulate all the forms and the sensational feelings that people perceive daily. As an urban plaza between two high-rise office buildings, the two-hand platforms, that users literally walked across to get to a Zen garden, was a cross between pop-art and Zen gardening.

#### Case Five: Celebrating Cultural Diversity

Sandy's presentation of her design was in the form of a participatory dance that she created to celebrate cultural diversity. She prepared different styles of clothes and costumes for all the members of the studio, including me. Before her dance began, she had each of us pick out one dress and wear it. During her dance, we had to touch different things that conveyed different sensational feelings, i.e., hard, soft, icy, hot, etc. Her body movements started in a very slow, boring, and

repetitive way. Then, it went into an energetic and diverse phase that made everybody wants to dance with her. Her participatory performance convinced us that everybody is different, as were the different costume that each of us wore. However, we all felt the world surrounding us, no matter if it was a warm spring day with beautiful flowers, or a cold snow-storm with that made the streets seem desolate. Her message was that everyone was part of the world, and everyone's culture contributed to the daily culture that others experienced. She brought to us, her dance co-performers, that it was possible to celebrate each others' differences and cultural diversities together.

Therefore, in her metaphorical garden, she creates a three-stage spatial sequence. In the first spatial stage users moved through an entrance that was lonely, closed off and sad. In the second spatial stage a water plaza provided distraction, excitement, an opportunity to meet friends and enjoying differences. In the final spatial stage users entered a mountain vista where they could reflect back and enjoy their experience of many different types of spaces, and different kinds of people met along the way. The experience of bodily movement through space that Sandy used to constructed her own design vocabulary can be understood as follows:

ENTRANCE- tight path means you walk alone, tall shrubs means you are closed off and slightly bored, low over head means you feel uncomfortable and restricted—BUT the sound and small sights of the water tantalize you to keep going and discover something better

WATER PLAZA- public space to allows people to interact and communicate about their shared experiences—the water distracts you from the unhappy feelings you had before

MOUNTAIN VISTA - when you come down the steps you are surprised by the loud sounds of the waterfall so close by—when you view the mountains and valley in the mural you are inspired by the possibilities of different experiences and people you can have!

#### Conclusion:

I end with Sandy's Celebrating Cultural Diversity, because the thirty-three students in my studio all celebrated their cultural and personal identities in their presentations. I found that this project enabled students to make the transition between process of telling their own stories and the process of defining design vocabularies that they were passionate about (Mirochnik, 2002). Besides the five cases that I analyzed above, there are many other interesting projects that I cannot elaborate in details. Some of my students chose as their favorite places areas that are beyond my imagination. Writing in 1986, W. Mike Martin reminds us that the relationship between the beginning design studio teacher and their student(s) is just as much about the human aspects of the relationship as it is about the professional-apprentice aspect of the relationship (Martin, 1986). I believe that the diverse identities that my stu-

dents embody are starting points for the development of diverse sets of personal design vocabularies. This attitude that diversity can and should be expressed is one that I have found has let me to redefine my relationship to my students: Instead the complying with traditional teacher/student role, I am a listener and their roles are the storytellers. Although I evaluate their projects, there is no single guideline that I apply to everyone's design. Hence, they do not compete against each other. They work as a team to support each other, because they realize that everyone has a unique and evolving identities (Kegan, 1982). Everyone's idea can contribute to the class environment. More importantly, their personal stories and unique design projects constantly refreshes my inner life as a teacher (Powell, 1997). In my best moments as a beginning design studio teacher my students and I dance a dance in which there is no boundary that separates identity from part, personal history from design vocabulary, and mind from heart. This dance truly refreshes and renews me.

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